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An Investigation of the Effects of Peer Evaluation in Enhancing Algerian Students' Writing Autonomy and Positive Affect

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of a study that was conducted on the effects of peer evaluation in promoting EFL students' writing autonomy and their positive affect. The researcher used pre- and post-training surveys, class observations and peer evaluation rubrics. The results of the study showed that unlike the control group, the subjects in the study group demonstrated positive attitudes towards giving and receiving peer feedback. In addition, their involvement in social interaction during the evaluation process, as writers and readers, has decreased their writing apprehension and increased their writing self-efficacy (positive affect). Moreover, the process of reading, rethinking and revising has enabled the subjects to try new writing tasks on their own and develop their writing autonomy.

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Keywords: Writing process; peer evaluation / feedback; writing autonomy; affect; writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy; EFL.

1. Introduction

EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners generally regard writing as a difficult component in their English language acquisition. In the Algerian universities in general and at the Setif University English Department in particular, undergraduate students writing difficulties are related to two main reasons: their negative affect towards writing (i.e., their high writing apprehension and low writing self-efficacy) and the lack of regular assessment. The latter is related to other factors, such as the large class size and the use of traditional methods of teaching and assessing writing. These are some of the factors that prevent the students from developing writing autonomy and critical thinking skills.

To address the above-mentioned problems, the researcher implemented the technique of peer evaluation to assess the students' writing more effectively. In doing so, she sought to investigate the relationship between the use of peer evaluation, in the writing process, and the students' writing autonomy. She also attempted to examine the effect of this technique in promoting students' positive affect, mainly decreasing their writing apprehension and increasing their writing self-efficacy.

2. Understanding writing

Modern research on writing suggests that writing is a process that goes through various stages (Kroll, 1990). This process teaches the students to learn to write by writing. In other words, writing is the process of exploring ideas and thoughts and learning about them through writing. In addition, White and Arndt (1991) claim that the current emphasis in writing instruction is on the process of creating writing rather than the end product, and the basic goal of process writing is that all students, regardless of age and level, can write.

2.1. The stages of the writing process

According to White & Arndt (1991), the process of writing involves six stages, which are interrelated and interdependent, and they include: pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and proofreading, publishing and conferencing. In fact, different researchers give different names and definitions to the phases of the writing process, and most of them agree on the four first stages afore-mentioned. However, White and Arndt consider publishing and conferencing as further steps that writers go through to end up the whole process of writing. The diagram below shows clearly the various phases of the writing process and how they are interrelated.

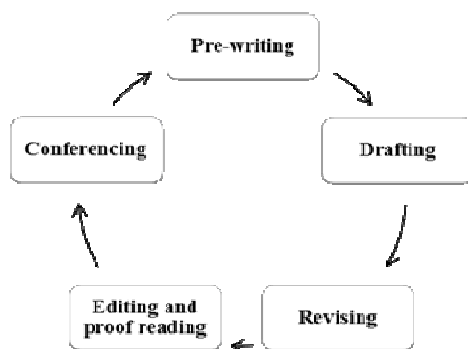


Figure 1. The writing process (Adapted from White and Arndt, 1991)

Pre-writing, or idea-generation, is the first step writers engage in before starting the act of writing. It embraces such activities that a writer goes through before writing actually begins. The aim of these activities is to stimulate students' thinking, and they include selecting a topic, brainstorming, and planning. *Drafting*, or putting ideas down into form, is the act of structuring the idea by taking it beyond notes, diagrams, and journal entries

corrections that the writers have already explored in the previous stage (Brown & Hood, 1989). After they have completed their first draft, their writing begins to take shape. The next step in drafting is organizing thoughts in a cohesive and coherent way in order to achieve the intended meanings.

Revising, i.e., rethinking and rewriting, is the third phase of the writing process. It is the process through which writers decide on what to expand, modify, or retain in their pieces of writing. Gardner (2005) thinks that good writers do not revise their pieces once; rather, he considers revision as a “re-vision”, that is, “rethinking and reshaping the content and structure of a draft to improve it at all levels: word, sentence, paragraph and essay. Thus, he sees revision as a “whole process” during which writers revise their work at different levels in order to improve it (p. 119). The aspects that require improvement include “content, clarity, unity, coherence, development and organization” of ideas (p. 122). *Editing and proofreading*, or giving reader feedback, are aspects of the revision process. Gardner (2005) defines editing as a further step in revision, during which student writers focus on the technical aspects of writing. These include, but are not limited to, revision for mechanics, sentence structure and word choice. On the other hand, White and Arndt (1991) think that most writers undertake the latter after significant revision has already taken place. They advise that when students edit, they should pay attention to things like rhythm, pacing, word choice, accuracy, and sentence and paragraph structure.

Conferencing, or getting reader feedback, gives students the chance to share their writing with others and get feedback from them. Thus, both peer and student-teacher conferencing is an essential component of the writing process (Leki, 1990). However, if peer conferences are not guided by the instructor, they can be destructive rather than constructive for students’ progress. Therefore, it is important that writing instructors provide instructions for their students about the criteria of peer evaluation/ feedback criteria in order for them to exchange constructive feedback.

3. Peer evaluation, writing autonomy, and affect

3.1. Defining peer evaluation

Peer evaluation (peer feedback, or peer review) can be defined as the process of “integrated activities” in which students are socially involved in “responding to each other's writing” (Johnson & Roen, 1989). In doing so, students, as evaluators, use different forms of evaluation (checklists), generally set by the instructor, and give feedback according to given criteria about their peers’ writing for further improvement. This peer evaluation process calls for a number of interactive skills, “reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking” (p. 208), in which students are set in a real communicative context to practise the language. Peer evaluation has many forms. It can be a small-group response, in which student writers receive feedback from a “supportive audience” (Peregoy & Boyle, 2001, p. 212); a pair response, in which two students exchange their writing and feedback with each other; or a whole-group response, especially in seminar discussions or class conferencing, where all members of a group provide feedback to the student speaker.

3.2. Affect in writing

The term ‘affect’ refers to ‘aspects’ of learner’s ‘emotion, feeling, mood, or attitude’ which condition behaviour’ (Arnold, 1999, p. 1). It is considered as a very important contributing factor to success in learning. In foreign language (FL) learning, aspects like ‘attitude’ and ‘motivation’ are the best predictor of FL achievement. Language apprehension or anxiety is, on the other hand, considered to be an inhibitor for FL achievement.

In relation to writing, affect has to do with the ‘writer’s perceptions and beliefs’ and the ‘writer’s personal knowledge’ (Abdellatif, 2007). Aspects like ‘writing apprehension’ and ‘writing self-efficacy’ refer to the first category, i.e., writer’s perceptions and beliefs, and have a tight relationship with students’ success or failure in FL writing.

Writing apprehension is used interchangeably with writing anxiety. It refers to the learner’s “tendency to avoid or approach writing situations” (Daly & Shamo, 1978, p. 120; in Abdellatif, 2007, p. 59). In other words, writing apprehension is the learner’s “pre-disposition which determines how s/he responds to the situation in or through which s/he may be involved in performing writing tasks or in which her/his writing may be evaluated” (Abdellatif, 2007, p. 59).

Writing self-efficacy: Self-efficacy refers to the learner’s beliefs about her/his learning capacities which in turn can “determine what s/he does with the knowledge and skills s/he has” (Bandura, 1997; in Abdellatif, 2007, p. 59). It helps learners control their goals about future writing achievements, the amount of effort to be devoted to

perform the task (s), “the perseverance” they will need to surmount possible difficulties, and their “thought patterns and emotional responses” (Pajeres & Johnson, 1994, p. 314; in Abdellatif, 1997, p. 59).

3.3. Writing autonomy

Learning autonomy plays an important role in a foreign language classroom. In an EFL writing classroom, instructors act as facilitators in the sense that they provide guidelines for the students and let them write. As a productive skill, writing requires much practice among the learners and class sessions may not be sufficient for them to practice the various skills of writing and achieve a lifelong progress. Therefore, learning to write independently has now become a necessity, especially for college and university students. Teaching experiences and research proved that implementing peer evaluation in a writing classroom is one of the most effective techniques that help foster student writers’ autonomy and develop their critical thinking skills (Thomas, Martin, & Pleasants, 2011). Hence, through training and practice, students will learn to think, write, provide feedback to each other and revise and edit their own writing.

4. Implementing Peer Evaluation in EFL Writing Classes

In respect to the claims made by some researchers about the importance of implementing peer evaluation in EFL writing classes, Min (2006) points out that this technique of evaluation has empirically been proven to be advantageous to EFL learners from “cognitive, affective, social, and linguistic” perspectives (p. 118). In other words, when students are involved in the process of peer evaluation, they get more opportunities to develop their critical thinking, enhance their learning and understanding of the criteria of evaluation, and improve their social and communicative skills. In addition, working with and evaluating peers, especially in higher education, reduces students’ writing anxiety, promotes their motivation and self-esteem (Elbow, 1981; in Johnson & Roen, 1989), and increases their willingness to take risks and try new tasks.

Moreover, during her experience in teaching writing to EFL undergraduate students, the researcher has observed that her students were more comfortable and enthusiastic when approaching writing tasks in collaborative work in comparison to individual tasks. Thus, while offering guidance to her students, she noticed that her students demonstrated a sense of mutual responsibility in evaluating each other's writing, exchanging ideas, and giving constructive feedback. They also showed positive attitudes towards pair work and peer evaluation. In this respect, research proved that the technique of peer evaluation saves time and effort for many EFL writing instructors, mainly for those who have time constraints and large class sizes (Miao, Badger & Zhen, 2006). It also encourages students' learning autonomy and productivity in writing.

Similarly, in a study carried out on whether or not to implement peer evaluation in second language writing, Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, and Huang (1998) found out that ESL students in Hong Kong and Taiwan demonstrated a great acceptance of peer response as one type of evaluation. This means that in addition to peer evaluation, these students also used or received other types of evaluation, such as self-evaluation and/ or teacher feedback.

5. Study methodology design

The present study seeks to investigate the effects of peer evaluation in fostering undergraduate students’ writing autonomy and their positive affect. In doing so, the researcher used a combination of qualitative and quasi-experimental methods in collecting and analyzing the data. The following is a brief description of the study participants and the instruments used for data collection.

5.1. Participants of the study

The participants of this study were randomly selected from the Sétif University English Department, in Algeria. The focus was given to second-year undergraduate students who received a writing course on paragraph and essay writing as part of their curriculum for two years. The sample of the study consisted of two groups (a

control and a study group) of thirty (30) students each out of the whole number of second year students (approximately 300 students).

5.2. Data collection instruments

The researcher used qualitative data collection instruments that consisted of pre- and post-training surveys, writing tasks (before, during, and after training) that were evaluated through evaluation rubrics, and class observations. The following is a brief description of each of these instruments used in the study as well as the research procedure.

5.2.1. Pre- and post-training surveys

In order to measure the subjects' affective factors (their writing apprehension and their writing self-efficacy), the researcher used An English Writing Apprehension Scale (EWAS) and an English Writing Self-efficacy Scale (EWSS). The surveys were adopted from Abdellatif (2007) in a study that he conducted on Egyptian students to measure their affective factors. The surveys were administered to both the control and the study groups, before and after the training sessions in order to find out whether the writing experience the subject had during the training period has enhanced their positive affect (i.e., decreasing the level of writing apprehension and increasing the level writing self-efficacy).

5.2.2. Training sessions

It is important to mention, here, that the subjects in both groups had already received training on the various phases of the writing process as part of their writing curriculum before the study actually took place, and that the writing instructor/ researcher used the process approach in teaching writing throughout her teaching career. It is also worth noting that the subjects in both groups had no prior knowledge about essay writing in English as a foreign language; so, they were given training sessions on the strategies of writing an expository essay through the process of planning, drafting and revising. However, in the present study, the researcher emphasized on the revision and the editing phases of the writing process with the study group only, and she trained her subjects to use the peer evaluation technique during these two stages.

The training period took eight weeks, with a two-hour session twice a week. The subjects were set to work in pairs and sometimes in groups of three or four, in order to encourage interpersonal and communicative skills. After they had had sufficient practice on the writing process and an understanding of the criteria of evaluation, they were given individual writing tasks (expository essays) about topics of their choice. While writing, the subjects were engaged in composing their essays, using different strategies throughout the whole processes of pre-writing and drafting. After finishing their first drafts, the subjects were asked to exchange essays and to provide feedback on each other's pieces of writing by using evaluation rubrics. The researcher provided guidance whenever needed, and observed the process of evaluation between the small groups. This process was repeated several times until the students mastered the technique and the evaluation criteria.

5.2.3. Writing tasks (before, during, and after training) and peer evaluation rubrics

Before the training period actually started, the researcher assigned a pre-writing task (writing an expository essay on one of the topics suggested) for both the control and the study groups. The researcher did not grade the essays; rather, she evaluated them qualitatively by using an evaluation rubric (the same rubric was used for the post-training writing task), because the study was qualitative in nature. After the subjects in both groups had written their first drafts of the essay, they were asked to revise them on their own, by using an evaluation rubric that the researcher provided for them. After that, they wrote a second draft of their essay and the researcher collected both drafts (first and second drafts of each subject in both groups) and compared them in terms of organization and the quality of writing. She also compared the results obtained from the pre-training writing task in both groups, which she would compare to the post-training task.

While training the subjects (the study group) to use peer evaluation in revising their first drafts, the researcher provided evaluation rubrics, which consisted of evaluation criteria that the subjects would refer to in evaluating their peers' essays. The evaluation criteria included aspects like, the content (amount and richness of ideas) of the essay, its format and organization, style and mechanics. The subjects were asked to write an expository essay about various topics that were suggested by the researcher, and after they received sufficient training on the different strategies of brainstorming and planning, drafting and revising, they were asked to develop their ideas in an attempt to finish their

first drafts. After that, the subjects were asked to exchange their pieces of writing and were asked to read and evaluate their peers' essays. The role of the researcher was to observe the process and to offer guidance whenever necessary. This process was repeated several times until the subjects were ready to use this technique of evaluation on their own. At this stage, i.e., after training, the subjects were asked to read and comment on their peers' pieces of writing, using peer-evaluation rubrics. To ensure objectivity, the essays were anonymous and were distributed randomly. After this process, the researcher collected the essays with their corresponding peer-evaluation rubrics and distributed them to their owners (writers). The latter used the peer-evaluation rubrics to revise their own essays and were asked to write a second draft. They had the chance to write at least three essays on different topics, and received feedback from each other regularly.

After the training period, the researcher assigned a writing task (similar to the pre-training writing task) for both the control and the study groups and she collected the first drafts of the essays immediately after the subjects finished writing. She, then, distributed the first drafts to the subjects in the control group and asked them to revise them, while she distributed the first drafts of the study group for peer evaluation. Along with the first drafts of the essays, the researcher distributed an evaluation rubric (similar to the one she used to evaluate the pre-training writing task) to the subjects in the control group and a peer-evaluation rubric to the subjects in the study group. Finally, the subjects in both groups were asked to write a second draft of their essays, after considering the evaluation rubrics of their first drafts, and both were compared. The researcher also compared between the results obtained from both groups in terms of the overall organization and quality of the essays.

5.2.4. Class observations

Throughout the training period, the researcher had been conducting class observations in order to examine the subjects' behaviour and their social interaction while working individually, in pairs or in groups. Most of the classroom work was group or pair work, and the researcher was interested in maximizing group discussions and encouraging communication among the student writers. This had been the case with pre-writing, revising and editing activities. She was mostly interested in the type of discussions where the subjects revealed their critical thinking skills and their ability to benefit from those discussions in writing and rewriting their draft essays. In other words, observations helped the researcher to obtain information on the subjects' critical thinking skills and their writing autonomy.

6. Analysis and interpretation of the study results

The study is based on the author's recent teaching and research experience with EFL undergraduate students during the academic year 2011-2012. This has permitted her to obtain quantitative and qualitative results that will be analyzed according to the study aims. The researcher used a study and a control group in order to examine the effects of using peer evaluation by analyzing the differences that exist between both groups in terms of the various aspects (the subjects' degree of writing apprehension and writing self-efficacy before and after the training sessions, writing performance, critical thinking skills and writing autonomy) that were meant to be investigated in this study.

The following table describes briefly the quantitative results obtained from the pre- and post-training surveys on the degree (in percentages) of the subjects' writing apprehension and their writing self-efficacy. A brief interpretation of these results will be given below, and a qualitative analysis of the rest of the study variables will be explained.

6.1. Quantitative analysis of the subjects' affective factors

The results given in the table below reveal important findings about the subjects' affective factors. Thus, by comparing the degree of writing apprehension of the participants in both groups before and after the training sessions, it is very apparent that there is a considerable difference. While the subjects in the control group remained in almost the same degree of apprehension (53%), those in the study group experienced a quite lower level of apprehension after training. On the other hand, unlike the subjects in the control group, a quite higher level of

writing self-efficacy was observed among those in the study group after the training. This explains clearly, though relatively, the effect of the training sessions, mainly through group discussions and exchange, on the subjects' feelings and beliefs about their writing abilities.

Figure 2. Degree/ level of writing apprehension (WA) and writing self-efficacy (WSE) before and after training

		Before Training		After Training	
		Low	High	Low	High
Control Group	WA	44 %	56 %	47 %	53 %
	WSE	70 %	30 %	68 %	32 %
Study Group	WA	47 %	53%	58 %	42 %
	WSE	64 %	36 %	43 %	57 %

Likewise, the researcher's class observations revealed similar results in the study group during the training sessions, particularly during the peer evaluation process. In other words, the results showed that the subjects in the study group demonstrated positive attitudes and an acceptance towards providing and receiving peer feedback. This can be explained by the fact that pair work and group discussions encouraged student writers to talk freely during the writing and the evaluation processes, which relatively decreased the subjects' level of apprehension. Moreover, giving and receiving peer feedback reinforced confidence in their abilities to comment on and evaluate each other's writing; i.e., it created a healthy atmosphere in the writing classroom. This process enabled the subjects to try different writing tasks and allowed them to develop a sense of mutual responsibility, which consequently helped them develop their critical thinking and autonomy in writing.

It is worth mentioning, here, that these results are relative for the reason that the observation took place only during the training sessions, which were conducted during a period of eight weeks, and that the number of the study participants was limited to thirty subjects; therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other writing situations.

6.2. Analysis of the subjects' writing performance

The subjects' writing performance refers to their progress in performing the assigned writing tasks before, during, and after the training sessions. The researcher used evaluation rubrics to analyse the subjects' writing performance (subjects' first, second and, sometimes, third drafts). The evaluation rubrics included the following main criteria, but the original ones were more detailed and simplified for the subjects, especially during the early stages of their training experience.

- *Content of the essay*, and this includes the amount and richness of ideas, depending on the topic in question;
- *Organization of the essay*, that is, its format, relatedness among and between the ideas, sentences, and paragraphs;
- *Style of writing*, including cohesion, coherence, type of sentences, writer's attitude and tone;
- *Mechanics, punctuation and grammar*.

6.3. Qualitative analysis of the results obtained from the comparison between the pre- and post-training writing tasks in both groups (study and control groups)

The results obtained from the pre- and the post-training writing tasks showed that most of the subjects' essays in both the control and the study groups were lacking cohesion and logical organization. In addition, it was apparent from the subjects' first and second drafts that many of them (more than half the total number of the subjects in both groups, i.e., 49 out of 60) did not make revisions at the level of content and organization; rather, they focused their attention on grammar and mechanics. The essays were not graded quantitatively; rather, they were evaluated qualitatively according to an evaluation rubric. It is worth noting, here, that during the training sessions, i.e., after she had analysed the results of the pre-training writing tasks, she considered the subjects' writing

problems, the researcher emphasized on the fact that the subjects concentrate in their writing on content and organization and give less consideration to the grammatical and mechanical errors, because the latter are further revisions that can be corrected in the editing stage of the writing process.

The results obtained from the analysis of the rubrics and the first, second and, in some cases, third drafts showed that all the participants in the study group improved their drafts to a certain extent, and that some of them performed better than others. Those who needed more attention, during the training, received guidance as to consider further revisions, and were asked to write a third draft. However, the subjects in the control group remained almost in the same level of performance in that those who had difficulties organizing and developing their essays were unable to overcome them. Their essays lacked in organization and cohesion and their revised drafts were not so much different (improved) from their first drafts.

The conclusion that the researcher drew from the comparison between the results she obtained from both groups is that implementing peer evaluation (with the study group) has enabled the subjects to not only improve their written drafts, but also develop their critical thinking skills through evaluating their peers' essays and revising their owns (after getting peer feedback). The process of reading, rethinking and revising has, hence, helped them develop their writing autonomy. Moreover, their involvement in social interaction as writers and readers has lowered the degree of anxiety among them and helped them acquire a quite higher level of confidence in their ability to write.

7. Pedagogical implications for EFL classes/institutions and suggestions for further research

Peer evaluation can be an effective technique of revision for student writers to improve their writing. Thus, as readers, students can enhance their critical reading skills by evaluating their peers' writing and, as writers, they foster their critical thinking by revising their own pieces of writing after getting peer feedback. Hence, in the writing process, students get involved in social interaction as writers and readers and, therefore, they can develop their interpersonal and communicative skills, which in turn will enhance their positive affect.

In addition, peer evaluation can be used to help instructors address class management issues, in different ways. Thus, peer evaluation can assist teachers in assessing their students' writing, in a regular manner, which is not an easy task when it has to do with time constraints and large class sizes. This technique of evaluation can be applied not only in a writing class, but also in other study areas. In addition, it can be used by EFL and ESL teachers to encourage students with a poor level of performance to actively work and interact with high achievers. This can help them improve their writing and other skills through exchanging, discussing, and sharing with each other, as well as developing their social and communicative skills in a foreign language.

Finally, and in consideration to future research, peer evaluation can be used among and between teachers to evaluate each other. This can be considered in two ways. Thus, EFL teachers who are in charge of the same subject matter can work in collaboration while preparing their lessons, course exercises, and mid-term and final exams. They can achieve better results if they evaluate each other throughout the semester. Moreover, based on the interrelatedness of some skills, such as reading and writing, teachers can exchange their ideas and experiences through peer review discussion sessions, which can reveal promising results for their students. On the other hand, teachers may attend each other's classes and offer feedback on each other's classroom performances, and those who have less experience can benefit more from experienced ones. This strategy can be adopted throughout a whole school or department to evaluate the overall school performance and achievement.

8. Conclusion

Peer evaluation can be an effective technique of revision for students to improve their writing and critical thinking skills, hence, develop their writing autonomy. Moreover, involving students in the process of peer evaluation enables them to interact with each other as writers and readers and helps them write more confidently and with lower levels of anxiety.

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Appendices

Appendix A. The English Writing Apprehension Scale (*Adapted from Abdellatif, 2007*)

Instructions: Below are some statements about your writing in English. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by ticking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. While some of the statements may seem repetitious, just take your time and try to be as honest as possible.

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I usually do my best to avoid writing English essays.					
2. I am afraid of writing essays in English when I know they will be evaluated.					
3. Whenever possible, I would use English to write essays.					
4. I usually seek every possible chance to write English essays outside of class.					
5. I like writing in English.					
6. I have no fear of my English writing being evaluated.					
7. I do not like English writing classes.					
8. I like discussing my English writing with others.					
9. I would rather read than write in English.					
10. I usually do my best to avoid situations in which I have to write in English.					
11. I do not like my English essays to be evaluated.					
12. Unless I have no choice, I would not use English to write essays.					

Appendix B. The English Writing Self-Efficacy Scale (*Adapted from Abdellatif, 2007*)

Instructions: Below are some statements about your English writing. There are no right or wrong answers to these statements. Please indicate the degree to which each statement applies to you by ticking whether you (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) are uncertain, (4) disagree, or (5) strongly disagree with the statement. Try to answer as honestly as possible.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I am not good at writing in English.					
2. It is easy for me to write good essays in English.					
3. When I hand in an English essay, I know I am going to do poorly.					
4. I expect to do poorly in English writing classes even before I enter them.					
5. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas when writing in English.					
6. People seem to like what I write in English.					
7. I do not think I write in English as well as my classmates.					
8. When my class is asked to write an essay, mine is one of the best.					